

Sagebrush, sandstone and sky

The ancient landscape of the Grand Canyon is complemented by a new luxury resort,
says Holly Finn

Let me just ask you this," says Rich, our Grand Canyon Field Institute guide, as we near the south rim. "Are you fundamentalist?" We squint, baffled. Nothing about us suggests piety – I'm clutching a strong coffee between two Connolly leather gloves and my fella Eliot is checking the Redskins game on his iPhone. Rich explains that he tries not to offend visitors whose beliefs might conflict with geologic science by, if necessary, editing out times and dates. "I cannot walk into your minds with dirty feet," he says.

Thankfully, our minds aren't the spotless sort. No faith is shaken when we're told the oldest rock in the canyon, the Vishnu Schist at the bottom, is two billion years old. And yet, holy moly, this feels like a religious place. Looking into that fearsome 277-mile-long crack in the planet, you want to laugh, clap, sing. Then you want to stand very still and say nothing. You'd have to be wicked to leave here unmoved.

America's canyonlands – not just the Grand Canyon, but beyond – are a revelation within the Grand Circle, a bull's-eye of land stretching through Arizona, Utah, New Mexico, Nevada and Colorado that includes the largest concentration of national parks and monuments in the United States. American families have long made the pilgrimage there. It's our version of a luxury European Grand Tour – only, sadly, without the luxury. Until now.

Before, you'd skip off in the morning to see all the sublime wilds, then trudge back at night to a motel with an ice machine. It was like going to St Paul's Cathedral for evensong, then McDonald's for dinner. But now, in southernmost Utah, bang in the middle of the Grand Circle, Aman Resorts has opened its newest hotel. The Amangiri, built entirely of sandy-hued cement, is the perfect match for its surroundings. It refuses to ruin the mood.

The hotel is so well-nestled into the ancient landscape that it's nearly invisible. Each of its 34 rooms opens to a view that film director John Ford would have loved: endless sagebrush, sandstone and sky.

Soon after we arrive, we take a three-hour hike around the property. Our spirited guide, Llermo, leads us to the petrified

sand dunes, past a huge hoodoo (one of those wacky bi-level rock formations, bulbous on top, skinny at the stem), across tangerine sand dotted with silvery rocks, and on to see the Native American petroglyphs of Broken Arrow Cave. Along the way he points out native flora: ephedra, for instance, is used in the drug ephedrine, which helps asthmatics breathe.

The hotel helps you breathe too. It greets you with a poem by Octavio Paz, etched into blocks at the entrance ("The wind sings in its turnings, the water murmurs as it goes") and quickly makes you feel less an interloper than part of the place. Picture windows in the expansive great room – sleek sitting and dining room combined, with rawhide chairs, bleached ash tables, and hide carpets – frame the vast view so you can watch it change by the hour, the shadows and colours shape-shifting on distant rock faces. As Dan, our hotel driver and a top local naturalist, says of this scenery: "If you spend 20-30 minutes just looking, you'll start to see it."

You'll also start to get thirsty: cocktails here include the Wise Apple, a blend of vodka with green apples, lime and sage. The meals, which feature lots of local produce, taste as if you're "camping in the desert".

Outside, a 165m-year-old sandstone rock formation juts into the sinuous swimming pool. And the nearby spa features treatments such as chakra realignment, as well as a steam room, sauna, and plunge pool. A hidden hot tub is ideal for taking in the

sky at day's end, when it suddenly turns a nearly-neon purple.

In John Van Dyke's *The Desert*, his 1901 chronicle of the American West, he talks about "How very shy people are about accepting a pink air, a blue shadow, or a field of yellow grass – sunlit lemon-yellow grass! The preconceived impression of the mind refuses to make room for the actual impression of the eyes." It's true, what you see out here is, for the first few hours, days even, hard to believe. You blink a lot. Then you blink some more.



Zion National Park is two hours away, Bryce Canyon three, Monument Valley two and a bit, Grand Staircase-Escalante half an hour, and legendary Lake Powell, with the Rainbow Bridge, is just down the road. All these places are best seen off-season, when the weather's cool and so are the crowds. Arches is reachable too, as is the Wave, a little known and impossibly mesmerizing formation in the Paria Canyon-Vermilion Cliffs Wilderness Area. These sand dunes, pink from iron oxide infusion, have been carved by wind and water into huge, hallucinogenic rock swirls. You've got to enter a lottery to see it.

But first things first: the Grand Canyon. It took the Colorado River between 6m and 40m years – most agree on about 17m – to carve this iconic slice out of the rising Colorado Plateau, like a knife through baking cake. Who wouldn't want to see that? And Rich takes us not just out to the rim and down a trail but somewhere few ever go: inside the home of the Kolb brothers, two small men from Pennsylvania who made it big in the Grand Canyon at the beginning of the century, just after the copper and asbestos prospectors descended.

The Kolbs took and sold photographs – you've seen the one of Teddy Roosevelt on horseback, swaying down Bright Angel Trail. They clearly did not believe in the mythic Navajo mischief-maker known as "He-who-kicks-people-off-cliffs": they built their house right on to the side of the canyon, where it is still hanging on today.

Many have warned against visiting these parts, let alone living in them. "In the desert everything either stings, stabs, stinks, or sticks," wrote Edward Abbey, the late American Western writer. "Something

about the desert inclines all living things to harshness and acerbity. The soft evolve out." Abbey's a great writer, but he's wrong in this case.

So many of the folks out here, where three deserts meet – the Great Basin, Mojave and Sonoran – are unusually observant, kind, even soft. The guides who offer horseback rides from the hotel, for instance – they're trained in "natural horsemanship", much like horse whispering. A couple of guests, both raised on Kentucky horse farms, go out one day and come back raving: "We've never been on horses like that. To go left, you just look left. To stop, you simply exhale."

Even the guides who lead tours in off-road Hummers are thoughtful. We sign up to see Secret Canyon, a little-known "slot

canyon" tucked away on the Navajo reservation and, as our young guide drives us down rock faces at a 46 degree angle, he reassures us: "Growing up out here, you have a good idea of your limitations," he says, "and the land's."

There's a lot folks learn here that we city-dwelling tenderfeet don't. This is America's Africa, after all. To see and understand such an expanse, to be schooled in its subtleties, takes years, even centuries – more than one trip. Locals are right to remind visitors, who on occasion can't help being impatient, uppity, or just plain ignorant, of their place in the truly grand scheme of things. "RAS", they mutter under their breath, "Rocks Are Smarter."

Details

Holly Finn was a guest of Aman Resorts. Rates at Amangiri are from \$800 until 14 April 2010 and \$850 between 15 April and 14 June 2010.

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The closest airport is in Page, Arizona, a 25 mile drive from the hotel. Commercial flights are operated by Great Lakes Aviation. Primary services operate between Page and Denver, Colorado as well as Phoenix, Arizona.





Majestic The Kolb house built on the side of the Grand Canyon (top); the Amangiri hotel in Utah (above) has views of the canyon

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